Many-Selved Family Portraiture

Abstract

Many-selvedness (such as in spirit possession, soulbonding, Multiple Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, multiplicity, and plurality) and relationships with noncorporeal beings (such as alters, soulbonds, spirits, and imaginary friends) have traditionally been shown in American art with themes of horror and misery: distorted, screaming figures, stark color schemes, and ‘fractured’ or ‘broken’ images of the human body. In this review, originally given as a panel with the title ‘Quick’n’Dirty Plural Artistic History’ at the October 2025 New England Graphic Medicine Summit, such artist themes are compared and contrasted with the self/s-portrait work of the many-selved themselves, concluding with a slideshow of 78 portraits, ranging from the 1970s until the 2020s.

Keywords

Self portraiture, plurality, multiplicity, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Multiple Personality Disorder, soulbonding

Introduction and Disclaimer

Hi! We’re LB Lee, and welcome to Many-Selved Family Portraiture.

Multiple personalities, plurals, soulbonders, systems, imaginary friends, story people… people like us can’t easily take family photos. We usually have to make them ourselves, and often, we can’t openly share them with anybody. Imagine having to hide your family photos. Imagine having to pretend your family are made-up fictional characters if caught.

Before we get started, just as a side note: the portraits I discuss and share today include a bunch of different kinds of people, who use different terms and frameworks to describe their experience. What they all share is a breaking of the idea that people with separate meatspace bodies are the only beings that exist, the only beings we can be family or form bonds with. Whether the beings in the portraits are spirits, personas, fictional characters, alternate personalities, or undefined is irrelevant to my purpose, which is to share the artistic depictions of these beings and the commemorations of the bonds we have with them, regardless of whether it’s corporeally ‘real.’ If you see one of these pictures and think, ‘wait, that doesn’t count!’ that’s wonderful! Ponder what your personal criteria are for what ‘counts.’ Think about it!

Okay, let’s get on with the fun stuff.

Portraiture

(Figure 1: Judy Castelli's portrait from JEB 1979: 44. Note the mirror and distorted facial features of the paintings.)

I got the idea for this project in October 2024, when I checked out from the library JEB's lesbian photo book from the seventies, *Eye to Eye*. This photo was in it of Judy Castelli, from 1978. On the preceding page is this quote from her: 'My official diagnosis is paranoid schizophrenia.'

Holy shit, I went. That lady's multi. She's gotta be. And sure enough, when I looked her up…

http://www.multiple-personality.com/index.html
68 captures
6 Dec 1998 - 14 Mar 2021
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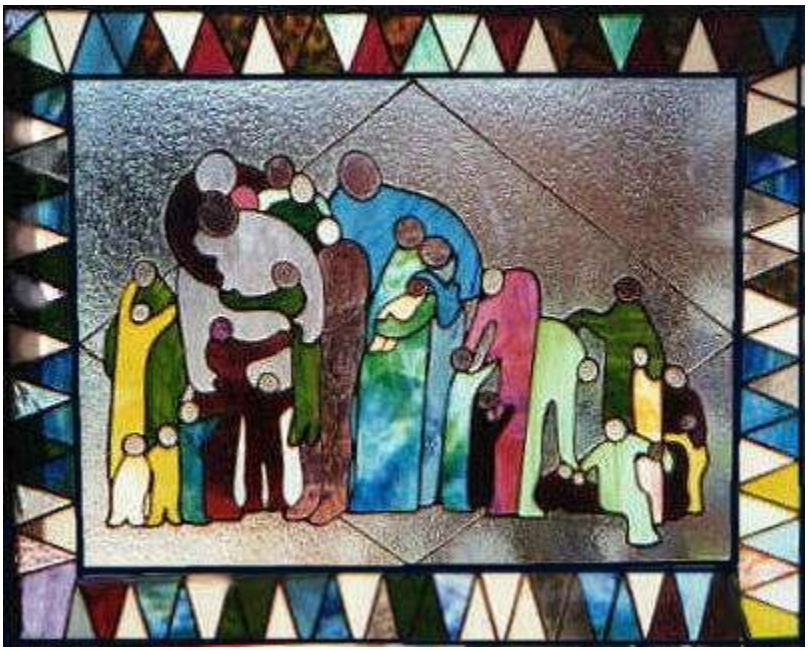
multiple-personality.com
MPD * and * ART
If you are a person who enjoys good art... if you are a person with MPD or DID... if you know a person with mpd... or DID... or if you are curious about multiple personality disorder... if you are a mental health professional... if you are in therapy... or if you need to be in therapy... if you just have a big heart (Did I say "just"?!?)... this is the place for you!
Castelli Studios Presents:
multiple-personality.com
This is where mental health, multiple personality disorder (MPD), dissociative identity disorder (DID) and art (ART) associate.
Please visit the Art Gallery See what I do with my time when I am not sitting at this computer.
Transferring data from web.archive.org...
(Figure 2: Wayback Machine Archive screen capture of Castelli's website. Source: Castelli 1998)

It took Castelli fifteen years from that photo to get diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, to find out what was really going on. Castelli became an advocate for other multiples, both online and off, published a book, a journaling kit, and an album of music, including her 1973 song 'Crazy Lady.' She also made art of her selves.


(Figure 3: Castelli's stained glass work, *Family.* Source: Castelli 1996)

Take a moment. Compare that 1978 photo to this 1996 stained glass.

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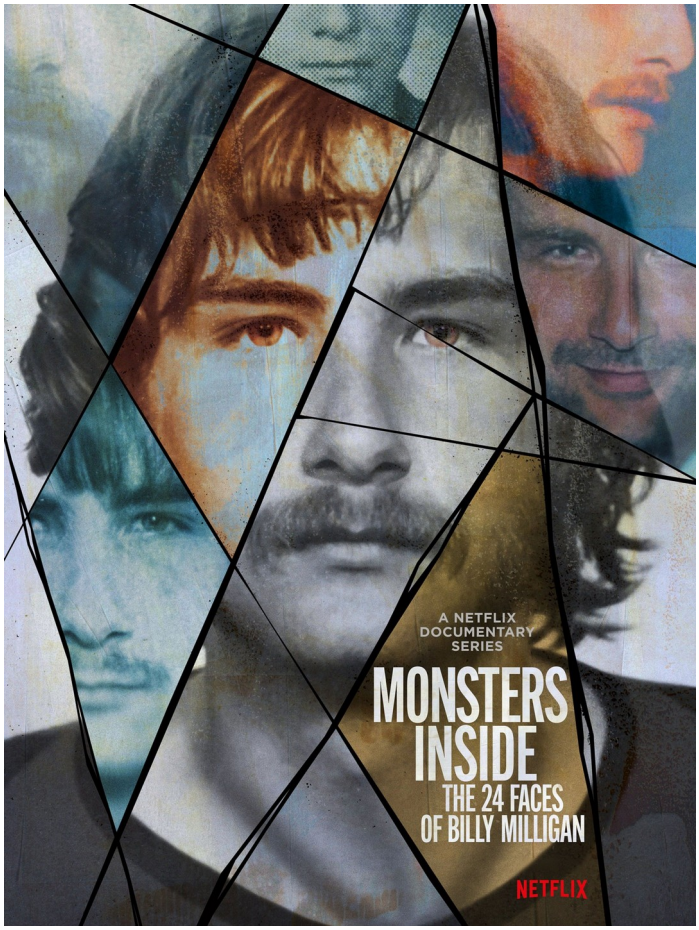
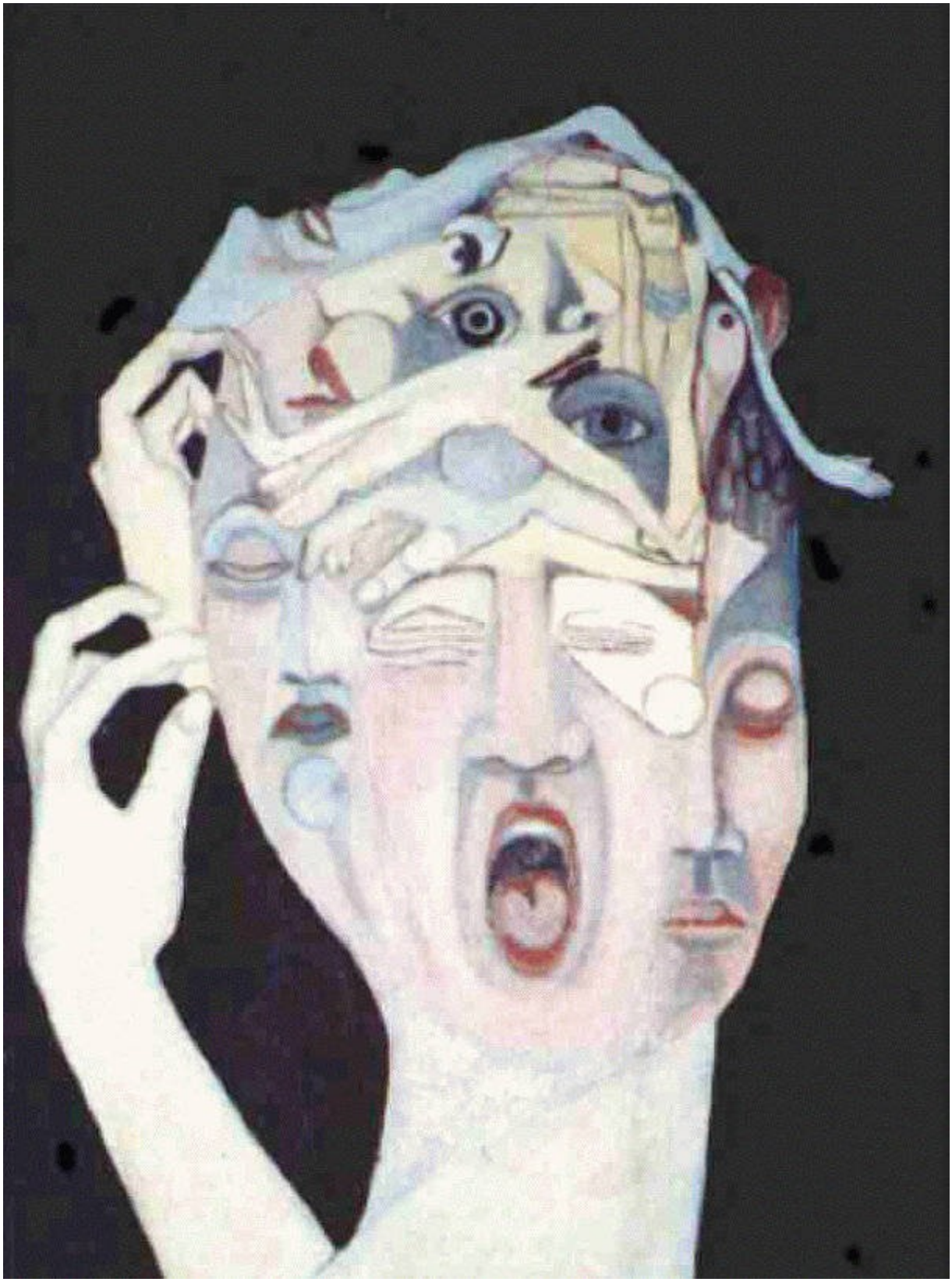


(Figure 4: poster design for the Netflix documentary series, *Monsters Inside: the 24 Faces of Billy Milligan.* Source: Blood and Chocolate 2021)

There's certain imagery we associate with portraits of people like us: mirrors, a human figure fractured or divided or multiplied, more than one face per figure, perhaps screaming in agony or snarling with rage. Color palettes are often limited or grim, the classic black, white, and red, for instance. You've probably seen at least one picture like this before. That iconography is why I was so sure Castelli were multi in that photo, fifteen years pre-diagnosis: she might've been considered schizophrenic at the time, but the imagery is all classic multi.

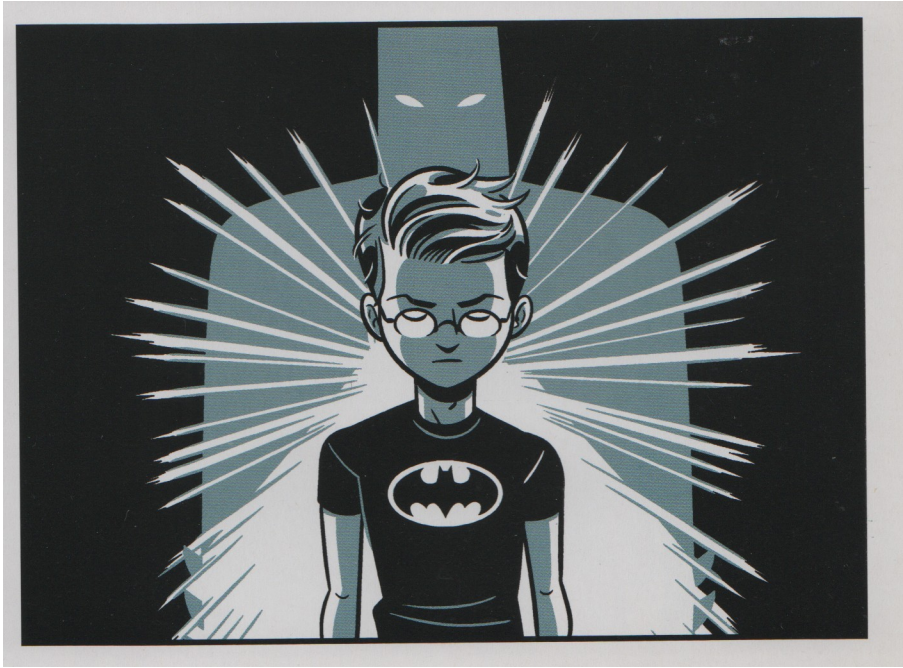


(Figure 5: Castelli's 1980 painting, *the Scream.* Compare and contrast with her works visible in JEB 1979, Castelli 1989, and Castelli 1998)

Castelli says she made this painting 'well before my diagnosis of multiple personality disorder […] and before my understanding of what exactly was going on inside […] it is an accurate view of

what I felt like inside, almost all the time. […] I have since found peace. I am no longer in the pain that is evident in this painting' (Castelli 1980).

I have noticed that trend in other series of inner portraits, a moving from agony to peace or happiness. Pain or brokenness can indeed be an important part of our experience, and it's important we commemorate that… but it shouldn't be *all* we commemorate. There is so much more to us than our suffering!



(Figure 6: Batman as a protector of an abused child in Trippe's 2016 comic, *Something Terrible*)

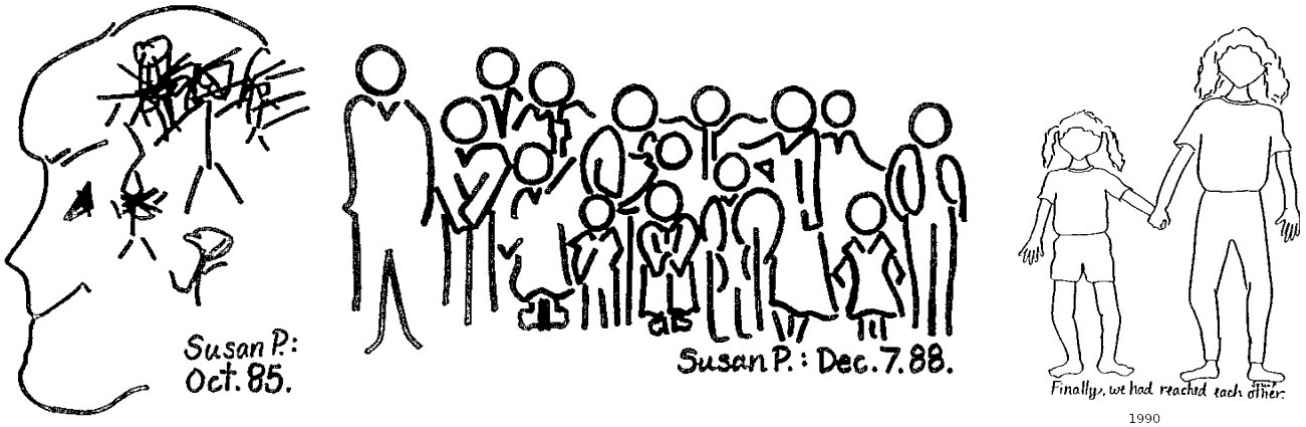
Mayday Trippe's comic, *Something Terrible*, is all about dealing with childhood violence via Batman. Batman's ontological status is not a focus, but Batman himself is always depicted as a protective presence; in the afterword, Trippe even writes about 'my deep dislike of psychotic or "broken" depictions of Batman. […] I felt like Bruce Wayne would've gone crazy if he hadn't become a bat' (Trippe 2016). We need to have room for all interpretations!

(Figure 7: Jay Andromeda's 2025 selves-portrait, *Bonfire Night*)

Other selves portraits, like this 2025 one from Andromeda, include things like rich otherworlds, demonstrations of relationships ranging from love to indifference. There are conversations, joy, depictions of various nonhuman beings, multiple generations. This is a depth of experience that people like us are not supposed to have. It's funny; in those 'broken mirror' portraits of torment that I mentioned, there may be figures piled upon figures… but they aren't *relating* to each other. Interesting, don't you think? It's like our experiences are expected to be deeply painful, but otherwise superficial—a bunch of screaming rats trapped in a rib cage, never looking at, talking to, or bonding with each other. How could that not be miserable? Compare and contrast that idea with this portrait. Some people in this portrait may be off doing their own thing, sitting alone, playing in the ocean, but they're still relating, still a part of the group. There *is* a group, not just a screaming pile of rats.

(Figure 8: Jewel Mansion's untitled Christmas card from 2000. Source: Jewel Mansion 2000)

Meanwhile, some folks even make things like Christmas cards! We ourself made one of our family portraits for New Year, and though I don't have one in the stack for today, I guarantee you folks have made Halloween dress-up ones. There's power in commemorating holidays, being a part of cultural touchstones even if only in private, or only among small circles of trusted people.

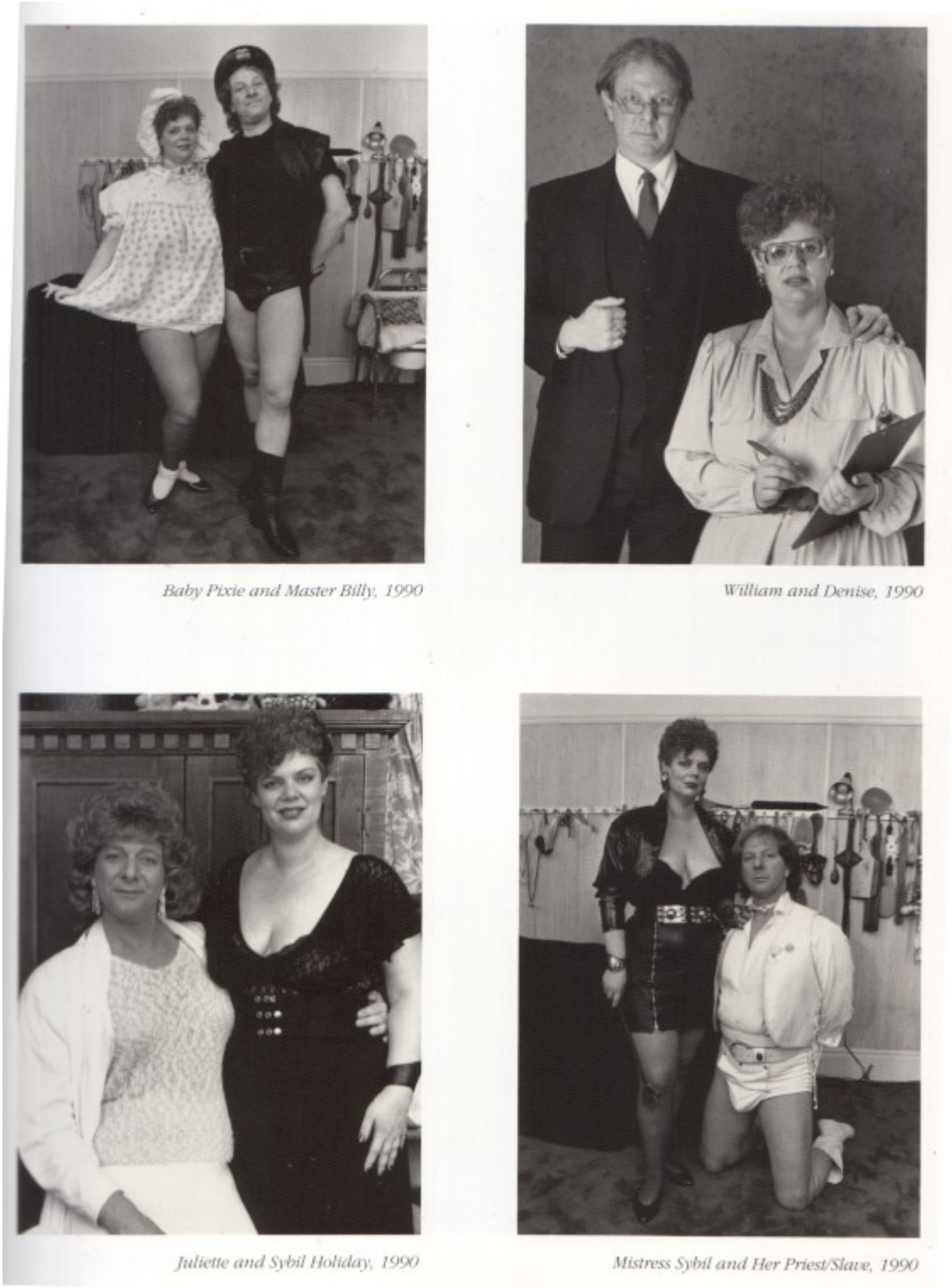


(Figure 9: series of selves-portraits by Susan P., made 1985-1990. Source: P. 1985, P. 1988, P. 1990)

Much to my delight, I've managed to scratch up a few different series of group pics, showing how folks have changed over time. A common lament when I solicited these portraits was, 'this art is so old and cringe' or 'oh no, everything we have is outdated,' and I had to explain that no, that's fine! We don't expect all the family portraits on the mantle to only be the most cutting edge new! We *expect* to see older photos, many photos; that's the point! Families organically grow and change over time! New members are born or marry in, others die or leave, people who are estranged return to the fold. It is the nature of relationships, the nature of *people*. A family portrait series tells you a lot about the people involved.

(Figure 10: LB Lee family photo, made by Susan of Alexandrites in 2024. Personal copy.)

These records of our lives are overwhelmingly self-made; photography is fairly uncommon, probably due to bodily dissonance or safety concerns. Regrettably, being open and being photographed is often a personally and professionally dangerous combination, garnering harassment, loss of money or work, or threats of violence. I know, because I've experienced all three. Even so, some lovely photographs exist, I'm pleased to say; Susan of Alexandrites (multiple herself) did a multiple exposure photo series of plurals, including us, in 2024. And that's wonderful! But she wasn't the first.


Baby Pixie and Master Billy, 1990
William and Denise, 1990
Juliette and Sybil Holiday, 1990
Mistress Sybil and Her Priest/Slave, 1990

(Figure 11: The personas of Bill and Sybil: Baby Pixie and Master Billy, William and Denise, Juliette and Sybil Holiday, and Mistress Sybil and Her Priest/Slave. Source: Rosen 1990, 55)

It is to my immense delight and pleasure to share this particular photoset from Michael A. Rosen's photo book from 1990, *Sexual Portraits*. These are the personas of Bill and Sybil—no, not that one. Sybil is still alive, while Bill, AKA William A. Henkin, has sadly passed on. They made a book together in the '90s called *Consensual Sadomasochism*, but that was after these photos were taken. In the interview preceding these images, they say,

‘Our personas are not masks or roles or parts taken on the way one might take on parts in a play, but emerge from the unity each of us is, with their own ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, their own needs and desires, and their own reasons for being’ (Rosen 1990: 54).

This photo set, when I stumbled over it in July 2024 at a used bookstore, damn near brought me to tears, because it is so singular, even 35 years later. It shows personas ranging in age from 4 ½ to middle age. It shows kinky personas, trans personas, sexual personas. These are among the most taboo of subjects among these portraits, the idea that we might have desires, queer desires, forbidden desires… and act on them, unabashedly, with each other! How dare we find pleasure? How dare we celebrate it, in public, in books where anyone could see? Have we no shame?

We are living in a time where works like this are increasingly being banned. The arguments are that they support sexual violence, the molestation of children, that they’re ‘adult content’ that should be scrubbed from public life. Paypal and other payment processors forbids the selling of books like this under its ‘adult content’ policy. It’s legal to buy it as an ebook, of course… just logistically impossible. And this kind of ban is mostly invisible to the general populace.

When I look at this photo set, I feel the power of shamelessly embracing all that is most underground and forbidden about us. I see the government and corporate powers amassing to try and strangle that power, and that is a concern for all of us here at a graphic medicine conference. If my graphic medicine works are already being banned as ‘adult content’ for discussing normal topics of life, such as child abuse, gender, queer love, desire… how long do you think it’ll take for other medical topics to become banned? How do you separate medicine, health, and the body from things like desire, trauma, and sex? Not everyone in this room may be affected right now… but one day, you will be.

When photos like this slide will no longer be obtainable, what will that teach us about people like us? What will become of our history?

I have roughly a hundred group portraits amassed of people like us. They come in stained glass, sculpture, drawing, painting. I will now show them all without commentary. Look on our families with wonder and joy. Remember us.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to everyone who privately gave me their selves-portraits for use in this presentation or earlier zines: Andromeda, a Body et al., Desired Constellation, Dragonheart Collective, Moon, Not Applicable, Paodjuret, Constellation of Dreams, Sorcyress, Supernova, Salt Institute, and Wanderstars. Also thanks to Alexandrites who provided the copy of *Mending Ourselves*, long out of print.

Citations:

(All portraits not cited were given directly from the artists.)

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